

# Benkelman Post and News Chronicle

## Thursday, April 22, 1976

### Dundy County Pioneers

By Anna L. Bengé

On Sunday, March 22, 1976, one of the few remaining Dundy County pioneer women still living celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Mrs. Estella (Reynolds) Merklin was born in Monmouth, Illinois on March 22, 1876. She was born and raised on a small farm. She was the daughter on J. Beverage Reynolds and Clara Joann (Stillwell) Reynolds. There were eleven children in the family, six boys and five girls. Stella was the oldest daughter.

The Reynolds children went to school in Illinois and in Nebraska.

The Reynolds family and the Oren Edmonds family, may mother's folks, were neighbors in Illinois. My grandparents came from near Biggsville, in Henderson County, Illinois and the Reynolds family came from Monmouth, Illinois and lived a distance of ten to fifteen miles apart.

The Beverage Reynolds family came west in 1888. They came from Monmouth by train. They brought their furniture, horse, cattle, and farm implements in a box car. They homesteaded in Cheyenne County, Kansas. It was partly located on the place that is now known as the Effie Morehouse Ranch.

The Reynolds family homesteaded near the Oren Edmonds family and renewed old friendships they had known in Illinois. Both families were of the United Presbyterian faith in Illinois and Kansas.

My uncle Robert Edmonds in his diary speaks of the Reynolds family coming from Illinois and homesteading in Kansas. I have noted some entries in his diary. On May 11, 1887, he sold a pound of butter to Mr. Reynolds for 10 cents. On July 27, he writes that he went to Benkelman for a coffin for the Beverage Reynolds baby and attended the funeral the next day. On January 14, Uncle Bob went with Mr. Reynolds to Benkelman to make out his papers for the Justice of the Peace. I don't know the meaning of this. On January 17, he helped Mr. Reynolds build a kitchen to his soddy. June 17, 1887, he went to Parks to preach in the company of Mr. Reynolds, Stella and Chase Reynolds and brother Ellsworth. On August 20, there was a prayer meeting at Mr. Reynolds' in the afternoon. Uncle Bob speaks of helping the neighbors in building a sod school house. No doubt the Reynolds children attended here. This was August 29, 1888. Through out the diary Uncle Bob tells how the neighbors helped each other. They borrowed from the corn crop, the wagon to gather cow chips, they butchered and divided the meat between the two homes and provided for transportation for each other to go to Benkelman, Parks or St. Francis. In September 1888, Mr. Reynolds and Bob cut cane for each other.

This item interested me. Uncle Bob tells that he and Mr. Reynolds went to Hackleberry to get a stick for a rake head and had to pay 25 cents for it. The next day he said he cut corn stalks in the fore noon, took the bark off the rake head and cut a few more stalks. A few days later he and Mr. Reynolds made a corn stalk rake. In fact they worked two days on it. Then in the afternoon, they

raked and burned corn stalks. This was in March 1889. Farming methods were vastly different in those days.

On December 5, Uncle Bob speaks of gathering corn and then the neighbors came in as a surprise and helped him gather his corn. He mentions Mr. Reynolds, Neigh Reynolds, Jack McDermott, his father, and brothers Jonnie and Perry. Mrs. Reynolds, his sisters Dora and Zada and sister-in-law, Jennie, brought food and served the men their dinner in Uncle Bob's soddy. My Uncle Bob was a crippled in childhood from what they called White Swelling and it was difficult for him to walk.

On December 21 Uncle Bob and Neigh Reynolds went after a load of cow chips from the Mr. Jim Nesbit's Ranch. They gathered enough for both homes. In the afternoon of the same day, Neigh finished picking Bob's corn and was paid 15 cents for the afternoon's work. Neigh was a young boy at the time.

On December 25, 1889, the Oren Edmonds family had a big Christmas Diner. Uncle Bob mentions Mr. and Mrs. Beverage Reynolds and children, his sisters Zada, Dora, and Laura and Jim Gorthy, his brother Ellsworth, Perry and Wife, Jenny and himself as being guests. In the evening he went to prayer meeting with Mr. Reynolds.

When Mr. and Mrs. Oren Edmonds celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, among the guests were the Beverage Reynolds family. A picture was taken of the occasion. Some fifty members of the Edmonds family and guests were present. Mr. Reynolds is easily recognized in the picture.

Estella recalls several incidents in her early life in Cheyenne County. When growing up they didn't have a well but had to carry all their water from the Republican River which was seven miles from their homestead. They made the trip every day for water. They used it as it was, never boiled or sterilized it in any way. Bob Edmonds writes that he helped Mr. Reynolds dig a well which apparently wasn't successful as often happened in the western country. The water was so deep they couldn't get to it or often they struck a rock formation.

Mrs. Merkin told of the school house constructed of sod. It was used as a chicken coop in the summer and in the fall they ladies would scrub the inside and white wash it. The fathers would meet and make new benches in the fall before school would start. The children didn't go the full nine months like they do now. The schools of that time lasted from three to five months. The older children were needed to work on the homestead and again the homesteaders couldn't afford to pay a teacher for a very long period.

This incident must of happened when they lived in Illinois. There were many apple orchards in the section from where the Reynolds family came. There were definitely no apple orchards in early Kansas. Estella told of the time she and a girl friend decided to pick some apples during the lunch hour. The all wore big full aprons then. So they filled their aprons with the delicious apples. But alas! Time got away from them and they were late getting back to school. They put the apples in their play house and walked back to school as if they were on time for school. The teacher was not thrilled at their being late and both got a real good spanking.

Stella recalls the only entertainment in those days for the pioneers was the literary society where they all met and visited each time after the close of the meeting.

There were bad snow storms on the prairie and Estella remembers her father tying a rope from the house to the barn so he could find his way from the barn to the home during such storms.

Stella met Bert Merklin in a little school house located on the South Fork of the Republican River. On February 10, 1897 they were married by the Presbyterian minister. The record of the marriage was destroyed by fire, so she had no way of tracing the name of the minister, and she couldn't remember his name. By searching in the back records of the Benkelman United Presbyterian Church in 1897, I found that Reverend [sic] W. C. Davidson was the minister. Perhaps he was the one who officiated. Stella goes on to tell that the minister took ill before the wedding and was unable to come out to the house to marry them. They ate the wedding dinner before the wedding. After dinner they came to Benkelman to the minister's home and were married, standing at the foot of his bed.

Shortly after the wedding they moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where Burt was employed by the Swift Packing Company. They moved back to Benkelman in the early 1900's, where Burt was employed as a carpenter. They took up homestead rights southeast of Benkelman and built the sod house in 1905. He went to work for Joe Robidoux hardware and machine shop. They had five children; Lorene (Merklin) Tucker, Lola Belle (deceased), Howard, Helen (Merklin) Perry and Everette.

Mrs. Merklin is deeply religious. She joined the United Presbyterian Church when she was fifteen years old or about 1892. She was a faithful member of this church while she lived here in Dundee County. She belonged to the Ladies Aid which was organized by the United Presbyterian Women's Foreign Missionary Society. They met in the homes of the members on the second Wednesday afternoon of each month. The ladies aid did a lot of quilting for the purpose of making money to be used in church work. Stella was one of the most faithful quilters and sewed a very fine seam. She was equally as good a member of the Missionary Society and took an active part in its affairs. Stella and my mother were attending a revival meeting at the U.P. Church. One night as they were walking home, little son Howard, ran on ahead and hid behind a lilac bush. When the unsuspecting ladies approached Howard jumped out and yelled "Boo." The ladies were quite upset at this unforeseen adventure and Stella reproved him severely.

Stella and Burt held many church offices and Burt was a trustee at one time.

Estella's living relatives, when I knew her, were Ney, Ed (a carpenter), Frona, whom I didn't know, Perrie, who lived across the street from us for many years and Ed. All of the Reynolds were musical and Perrie especially had a beautiful singing voice. My mother often spoke of the duets the Perrie and Frona sang.

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In about 1905, my parents built a frame house on their farm. Ed and Beverage Reynolds were hired as carpenters. Each day they ate the noon meal with my family. Mother had bed of horse radish. It was especially good at this time so she canned some of it and also prepared the horse radish to be eaten at the noon meal. Mr. Reynolds spoke of his enjoyment of eating horse radish with his meat. He was busy talking when he took a big bite of meat covered with the strong horse radish. He suddenly realized his error, opened his mouth and took a big drink of water. Finally he said, "Conscience, (that was as near a swear word as he ever used) I believe that would have blown the top of my head off it [sic] I hadn't opened my mouth." This caused much merriment and teasing of Mr. Reynold. [sic]

The Burt Merklin homestead home was always the scene of the United Presbyterian Sabbath [sic] School picnic each August. It was an occasion to which we all looked forward. The sod home was a

delight to see, and it was surrounded by large shade trees. There was always a swing put up for the children, and a horse shoe game for the men.

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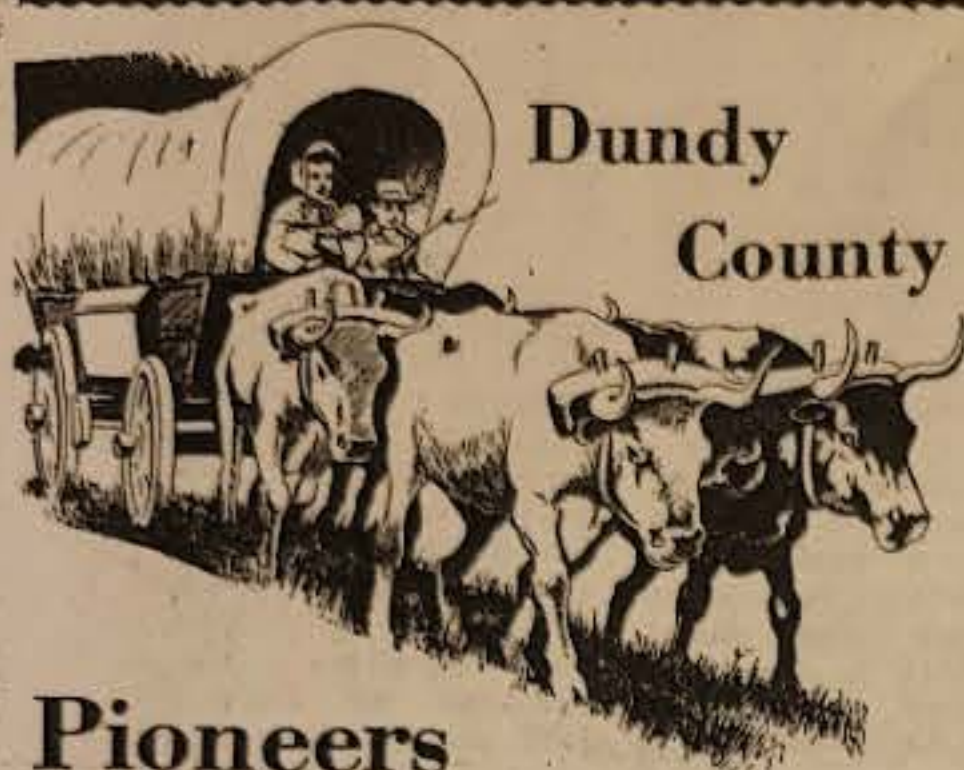
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She celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on March 22, 1976 with an open house. Around 150 guests called during the afternoon. In the evening she attended a family dinner at one of her grandson's home. She has four living children, 14 grandchildren, 40 great grandchildren, and 18 great great grandchildren. Relatives came from Hawaii, Chicago, California, Nebraska and Kanas to help her celebrate her birthday.

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**LIVE** TO ENJOY YOUR VACATION **DRIVE CAREFULLY!**

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